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What Oswald Trial?

ABC Docu-Drama Staggers Around With a 'What Might Have Been' Theory

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Was President John Kennedy assassinated by a crazed gunman acting alone or was it part of an elaborate conspiracy?

That question has been hotly debated for almost 14 years. But we're right in the middle of the season of the "docu-dramas," so tonight ABC (Ch. 17 in Jacksonville) gets into the act when it airs the first segment of "The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald."

John Pleshette Under Heavy Grilling by Lawmen

Tonight's episode is from 9-11 p.m., with the second segment scheduled in the same time period Sunday night.

These so-called "docu-dramas" — and there have been four of them in the last two weeks — are beginning to wear a little thin and this is the most misleading one yet.

One press release about the film carries the headline: "The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald Is Thoroughly Authenticated."

That's interesting since there never was a trial to authenticate.

It's the story of what might have been if Lee Oswald, the accused assassin of President Kennedy, had lived to stand trial.

This version purports to be an objective look at the "evidence," but it very strongly supports the conspiracy angle. It supports it with supposed "facts" that seem to pop up out of nowhere.

The most prevalent conspiracy theme has been that part of the plan was to silence Oswald after he committed the murder. Enter Jack Ruby.

But in this version there is no Jack Ruby. Were the conspirators trusting Lee Oswald to behave like

Photo by Lawrence Schiller

Defense Attorney Lorne Greene, left, and Pleshette, Center

Gordon Liddy and keep silent?

So without Ruby to spark the conspiracy angle, ABC has invented its own.

President Johnson calls the special prosecutor to tell him when it comes to searching for a conspiracy: "It wouldn't be good for the nation to have that suspicion."

There are FBI and CIA agents skulking around and looking suspicious.

There are Mafia-style murders.

And, of course, there's the fact that Oswald once lived in Russia.

Yessir, ABC throws out all the conspiracies you could ever ask for — take your pick.

John Pleshette, in his first starring role, is Lee Oswald and he's one of the best things about the film.

Pleshette is convincing as the TV Oswald. He's a loner, an unsympathetic character and by the end of the four hours he's still a mystery figure, just like the real Oswald.

Ben Gazzara plays the special prosecutor and Lorne Green, the defense attorney.

Like most of these specials, the production is slick and the performances excellent. The re-enactment of the shooting of President Kennedy in tonight's episode is all too realistic.

But with all the discussion about how television might be affecting some people's sense of reality, this show may be one of TV's biggest disservices.

To compound the matter, ABC has put a ballot in an ad in the Oct. 1 "TV Guide" asking viewers to vote whether they think Oswald is guilty and whether he acted alone or as part of a conspiracy. The results will be aired on the network's "Good Morning America" show, which is essentially a news program.

Voting on that, based on information in a "dramatized" TV show and announcing the results in a news show format is pushing the "docu-drama" concept too far.